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Carpenter Bees are Buzzing

Spring has arrived and the bees are buzzing. One bee that is attracting a lot of attention is the carpenter bee. At a glance, carpenter bees resemble bumble bees, but their abdomen is bare and shiny black, while the bumble bee's abdomen is hairy with yellow markings.

Despite their similar appearance, the nesting habits of the two types of bees are quite different. Bumble bees usually nest in the ground whereas carpenter bees tunnel into wood to lay their eggs. As the weather warms in the spring, carpenter bees emerge from old nest tunnels in wood and begin the busy work of cleaning out old tunnels and making new ones to deposit their eggs. A new tunnel is made by boring an entrance hole about ½ inch in diameter on the face of the wood. The entry hole goes straight in for an inch or two then turns 90 degrees to follow the grain of the wood for another six inches or more. After the tunnel is cleaned or finished, the female creates numerous cell chambers where she lays an egg and leaves some nectar and honey for the newly hatched larvae to feed on.



During nest building, the males may buzz around the area or hover in front of anyone approaching the nest; however, they do not have a stinger so they cannot sting. The front of the face of the male has a big white spot, while the female's face is solid black. The female does have a stinger but she rarely stings unless trapped or handled.

Carpenter bees prefer to nest in bare, unpainted or weathered softwoods, especially redwood, cedar, cypress and pine. Painted or pressure-treated wood is much less susceptible to attack; however, they occasionally bore into painted or stained wood. Common nesting sites include eaves, fascia boards, window trim, exposed timbers, siding, wooden shakes, decks and outdoor furniture.

Because they prefer to attack bare, unpainted wood, the best way to deter carpenter bees is to paint all exposed wood surfaces. Wood stains and preservatives will not stop them, but may provide some degree of repellency versus bare wood. To further discourage nesting, garages and outbuildings should be kept closed when carpenter bees are actively searching for nesting sites.

Insecticide sprays can be applied as a preventative to wood surfaces; however, they are effective for only a short period even when repeated every few weeks. Since the bees are not actually eating the wood and they are active over several weeks, they are rarely exposed to lethal doses of the pesticide. Recommended protective sprays are

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those that contain one of the synthetic pyrethroids as the active ingredient. These include beta-cyfluthrin, bifenthrin, cyfluthrin, cypemethrin, deltamethrin, fenvalerate, and lambda cyhalothrin, which are sold under various label brand names.

Tunnels which have already been excavated are best treated by puffing an insecticidal dust (e.g., Sevin, Drione, or PT Tri-Die Silica & Pyrethrum Dust) into the nest opening. Next best would be spraying one of the liquid insecticides into the hole; however, dusts penetrate the tunnel cavities better and seem to provide longer residual control inside the dry tunnels. Leave the hole open for a few days after treatment to allow the bees to contact and distribute the insecticide throughout the nest galleries. Then plug the entrance holes with wood putty, corks or pieces of wooden dowel. If the area is difficult to treat or if you have had little success yourself, you may wish to hire a reputable pest control business to treat the wood.

Mike Donahoe is the County Extension Director for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product names(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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